CIA Official Ousted After Interceding for Friend

By Walter Pincus
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The head of the CIA's Latin American clandestine operations was removed from his position last month for enlisting the agency's station chief in the Dominican Republic in an effort to help a childhood friend who had been arrested on a narcotics charge, according to a senior intelligence official.

After learning last year that his friend had been arrested for possession of two ounces of cocaine and a revolver, the Latin American division chief asked the top agency officer in Santo Domingo to tell local law enforcement officials of the chief's concern that his friend not be mistreated by police, sources said.

The official also wanted the station chief to tell Dominican Republic authorities to return his friend's car and other personal belongings, including a wristwatch, if he was released, the sources said. An agency official said yesterday that the friend, who had worked briefly for the CIA in the Dominican Republic in an administrative role but was not employed by the agency at the time of his arrest, was believed to still be in jail.

CIA officials asked that the name of the senior officer, which is classified, not be published because he has served overseas in a clandestine capacity and many of the foreign officials with whom he dealt were unaware of his connection with the agency. CIA officials declined to release the name of the chief's imprisonned friend.

The matter was investigated by CIA inspector general Frederick P. Hitz after an agency employee who had learned of the Latin American chief's actions contacted his superiors. "He thought it inappropriate for [a senior agency official] to intercede on behalf of someone accused of dealing drugs," one source said.

Hitz's findings were forwarded last May to the Justice Department, which determined that criminal prosecution was not warranted. A senior CIA management panel then reviewed the case and determined last month that the division chief, who was described as having an impeccable record particular in fighting narcotics, had shown "a remarkable lack of judgment" in this situation.

CIA officials concluded that his actions had created an incorrect impression with the host country that he was acting in the name of the agency, and implied an abuse of power and position among other CIA officers who were aware of the situation. As a result the panel recommended he should be demoted and reassigned out of the Directorate of Operations (DO) to the Directorate of Administration, the senior intelligence official said.

CIA Director George J. Tenet approved the recommendation and has appointed a new Latin American division chief, the source said. The Los Angeles Times published the first report of the division chief's demotion in its Tuesday edition.

A former agency official who had worked closely with the division chief described the effort to intervene in the Dominican Republic case as "an act of friendship." He added that in the past a senior official involved in such an overture "would have been quietly given a reprimand" under the former free-swinging culture of the DO, the CIA's clandestine service. "The new culture," this retired clandestine officer said, "is don't get involved even though he [the friend] has been a help in the past."

There was disagreement yesterday among present and former DO officers as to whether the CIA's handling of the case was influenced by the controversy that has followed now criticized 1996 accusations in the San Jose Mercury-News that the agency's alleged relationship with drug dealers was partly responsible for crack cocaine coming to South Central Los Angeles.

A CIA inspector general investigation of that issue, begun by Hitz and former CIA director John M. Deutch more than a year ago, has been expanded to include any possible agency relationship with drug dealers in Latin America since the early 1980.

Sources said the inquiry found no evidence that the CIA was responsible for the cocaine sales in Los Angeles and that report is in the editing phase. However, the inquiry into any earlier CIA activity with drug dealers is still underway, according to sources. "It has become a microscopic search of any cable with narcotics mentioned since 1981 or 1983," one retired officer said yesterday.

The long-awaited CIA report, as well as one from the Justice Department inspector general, had been expected to be released this month, sources said. A senior intelligence official said yesterday their release may be postponed until next year so that the broader study could be completed.